



THEORISING GENDER

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THEORISING GENDER*

R. W. CONNELL

Abstract A social theory of gender is implied and required by current sexual politics. Its scope cannot be defined *a priori*, but can be defined practically by the reach of a network of arguments generated by feminism, gay liberation, psychoanalysis and some branches of academic sociology and psychology. Two main types of theory have emerged: one emphasising attitudes and social expectations, centring on the idea of 'sex roles'; the other presupposing the categories of 'women' and 'men' and focussing on power relations between them. Criticisms of both general approaches to gender relations are outlined. An argument is advanced for a modification of the second, centring on the practices that constitute gender categories. Some examples of this third approach are mentioned. The problem of 'natural difference' can be handled in a practice-based theory of gender by a radical reversal of usual assumptions about biological 'bases' of gender, stressing negation and practical transcendence. Some political implications of this approach to theory are raised.

Introduction

We are in the middle of the most important change in the social sciences, and Western social thought generally, since the impact of socialist class analysis in the mid-nineteenth century. Questions of sexuality and personality formation were made prominent by psychoanalysis from early in this century, but Freudian doctrines have always been reputed speculative outside a narrow therapeutic context. A sociology of the family and a psychology of sex differences and sex roles have stuttered along for decades as academic specialties of a rather marginal kind. Academic anthropology has given much more attention to kinship, but its interest has tended to create an impression that this is a matter of importance only in 'primitive' societies. That is the view held by contemporary theorists as prominent as Jürgen Habermas; in his reformulation of historical materialism, sex appears as a 'principle of organisation' of pre-class societies only (Habermas, 1979).

That view has to be regarded as obsolete, in the strict sense of the word. 'Second wave' feminism and gay liberation have now made inescapable what was already suggested by some theorists of the 1940s. Sexuality, child development, the family, 'sex role' conventions, and kinship are parts of a whole. That whole is a social structure, not a biological one. It is, among other things, a structure of power, inequality and oppression; a structure of great scope, complexity, and consequence in our affairs as well as those of tribal and ancient societies.

In these respects it is fully comparable with the structure of class relations that has been the main concern of social analysis since the 'army of redressers' (Thompson, 1968) marched onto the scene and made questions of class inescapable a hundred and fifty years ago. The redressers of sexual oppression are currently producing a critical and analytical literature of an intellectual liveliness and practical relevance unmatched in any other field of social science.

The intention of this paper is not to mount an argument for the importance of gender questions to social analysis. That argument has now been decisively established. (Readers not familiar with it might consult Michèle Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today*, mainly on Europe, and Hester Eisenstein's *Contemporary Feminist Thought*, on the U.S.) My intention, rather, is to explore *what kind* of social theory of gender is likely to be most adequate, given current knowledge, understandings, and politics.

Scope

The scope of a social theory of gender is not easily defined. There are a number of speculative abstractions that appear to define it, such as the 'dialectic of sex' (Firestone, 1970); 'relations of reproduction' (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1978); and the astonishing new science 'dimorphics' (Strober, 1976). But these are more slogans for a particular way of theorising than specifications of what is being theorised.

It is better to accept that the social theory of gender is not a tightly-knit logical system. It is, rather, a network of insights and arguments about connections. For instance, one argument connects the dynamics of industrial capitalism and its sexual division of labour to the structure of the family (e.g. Zaretsky, 1976), while another connects the structure of the family to the production of femininity (e.g. Chodorow, 1978). The scope of the theory of gender at any given time is defined by the reach of this network of arguments.

We may reasonably say that at present the network firmly connects the following issues: the social subordination of women, and the cultural practices that sustain it; the politics of sexual object-choice, and particularly the oppression of homosexual people; the sexual division of labour; the formation of character and motive, so far as they are organised as femininity and masculinity; the role of the body in social relations, especially the politics of childbirth; and the nature and strategies of sexual liberation movements. The field defined by this network has no name in common use, though terms like 'patriarchy' and 'sexual politics' are useful in pointing to sizeable parts of it. Young *et al.* (1981) speak of 'the social relations of gender', a precise but somewhat awkward term. 'Gender relations' is perhaps the most practical name for the whole network.

Arguments based on definitions of the field that exclude some significant problems already linked into this network must be regarded as partial and very likely to be distorted. This applies even to good and original work. Dorothy Dinnerstein (1977) for instance gives a delicate and profound analysis of the emotional tangles involved in personal relationships between women and men. She connects these emotions – sometimes very convincingly – on the one side to the sexual division of labour in early child care and on the other to the general oppression of women. But her tacit definition of subject-matter (through a focus on what I will call the 'normative standard case') completely excludes the relationship between heterosexuality and homosexuality, the general oppression of homosexuals, and the currents of homosexual affect (open or repressed) in predominantly heterosexual people. We can fairly say that these matters are known to be involved in the issues Dinnerstein is analysing. Her failure to reckon with them not only narrows but partly subverts her argument. The causal connections

she proposes look much less convincing when homosexual paths of emotional development are brought into the picture of family dynamics too.

Of course it is not possible to theorise everything at once, as Dinnerstein fairly observes. But it matters to keep the whole structure in view. Less subtle analysts than Dinnerstein constantly simplify radical politics, and fragment it, by seizing on one part of the structure to the exclusion of the rest.

Broadly, accounts of gender relations that have attempted some synthesis of this field have been of two types. One emphasises the social construction of the categories of gender, the ways they are learned, inhabited, and transmitted. It speaks of 'sex roles', 'stereotypes', 'socialisation'. In terms of academic social science it stems from the work of Margaret Mead (1950), Talcott Parsons (Parsons & Bales, 1953) and Mirra Komarovsky (1946, 1950) in the U.S. This approach has enjoyed a huge revival in social psychology, sociology and allied trades since about 1970. The other tendency takes men and women for most purposes as already-constituted categories, and focusses on the relations of power and exploitation between them. It speaks of 'sexual politics', 'oppression', 'patriarchy'. Its intellectual sources are less specific, though a number of the important ideas were crystallised by Simone de Beauvoir (1949). There is much less academic writing in this vein than in the 'sex role' vein, but the ideas are widespread in the movement publications of women's liberation and gay liberation.

Sex role theory

The analysis of gender relations along the lines initially proposed by Mead and Parsons, as a social script which people learn and enact, is attractive in several ways. It gives, on the face of it, full weight to the social character of gender, emphasising the stereotyped expectations ('role norms', etc.) for women's and men's behaviour. It appeals to familiar facts: the colour of a baby's bonnet, the pitch of Marlboro advertisement, the script of John Wayne westerns, the aunt murmuring do's and don'ts in a schoolgirl's ear. It connects social structure with the formation of personality, via the idea of role learning or internalisation: thus women become feminine by learning the 'female role'. It can be specific about what 'agencies of socialisation' are responsible for this learning, pointing the finger at parents in the family, teachers in the school, scriptwriters and directors in television and film, etc. And the approach leads straightforwardly to a particular kind of political practice.

Since the 1960s, in fact, these theoretical ideas have underpinned the politics of liberal feminism. This is the strand of feminism most prominently represented by Betty Friedan (1976) and the National Organisation of Women in the U.S., though also widely diffused in the reforming feminism of the education systems (teachers, academics, and others) and bureaucracies of the OECD countries generally. Women's disadvantages are attributed mainly to stereotyped customary expectations, held by both women and men, which keep women back from professional advancement and create prejudice and discrimination against them. In principle, then, sex inequalities can be eliminated by measures to break down the stereotypes and redefine the roles. Among them are giving girls better role models, bringing in anti-discrimination laws, establishing equal-opportunity programmes in education and employment, and the like. This freeing-up of social convention may even be to the advantage of men. At least that is argued by the 'men's liberation' off-shoot of liberal feminism. (For this

curious story see Carrigan, Connell & Lee, forthcoming; for a notable endorsement see Friedan, 1981: 131-167.)

Many of the facts appealed to by sex-role theory are factual enough. No-one who glances at the British popular press could doubt the existence of pervasive sexist stereotypes in the media, for instance. Few who support equality would oppose anti-discrimination and equal opportunity programmes, though there is room for argument about their effects. But as social theory, as a general account of the social dimensions of sexuality and gender, sex-role analysis is drastically inadequate. It has a number of fundamental weaknesses, which have been documented in a number of critiques (Franzway & Low, 1978; Connell, 1983: 189-207; Edwards, 1983). Two are of special concern here.

The first concerns what many people see as role theory's greatest strength, its emphasis on the social. Role theory is indeed often seen as a form of social determinism, stressing the way people are trapped in stereotypes and expectations. This image dissolves on closer inspection. The 'expectations' are made effective, in role theory, through the idea that other people reward one's conformity to the stereotypes, and punish departures from them. In role jargon, the occupants of counter-positions sanction role performance. Boys are praised for being aggressive, ridiculed for being girlish. But why do the second parties apply the sanctions? It cannot be explained by role expectations on them, or we get into an infinite regress. It quickly comes down to a question of individual will, of choices to apply sanctions. The 'social' dimension of sex role theory thus ironically dissolves into voluntarism, into a general assumption that people choose to maintain existing customs. This leads to the second problem.

Lacking any way of grasping structural constraint, and hence lacking a means of formulating contradiction, the sex role framework is fundamentally static as social theory. This is not to say that role analysts ignore change. On the contrary. Change has been a leading theme in North American discussion of the 'male sex role' for decades (see for instance Hacker, 1957; Pleck, 1981). Changing definitions of the 'female sex role' have been the central theme in academic social science's response to feminism (for a review see Lipman-Blumen and Tickamyer, 1975). The problem is rather that role theory cannot grasp social change as history, that is, as transformation generated in the interplay of social practice and social structure. Change is always something that *happens to* sex roles, that impinges on them. It comes from outside, as in discussions of how technological and economic changes demand a shift to a 'modern' male role for men. Or it comes from inside the person, from the 'real self' that protests against the artificial restrictions of constraining roles. Sex role theory has no way of grasping change as a dialectic arising within gender relations themselves.

This is inherent in the procedure by which accounts of sex roles are constructed: generalising about norms, and then using the frozen descriptions as boxes into which to pack the events of people's lives. This happens even in the best sex role research. In *Blue Collar Marriage*, for instance, Komarovsky draws a beautiful picture of the politics of constructing a marriage: the emotional and sexual dilemmas of the new couples, the tussles with in-laws over money and independence, and so on. Then without turning a hair she theorises this as 'learning conjugal roles' — as if, in defiance of her own data, the scripts were just sitting there waiting to be read. The logic of role analysis forces role theorists to reify sex roles.

As Franzway and Lowe argue, sex role research highlights the attitudes that create

artificially rigid distinctions between women and men, and plays down the circumstances those attitudes are about. Especially it plays down the economic, domestic and political *power* men exercise over women. The project of feminism becomes a programme of role reform, of loosening social conventions, not of contesting power and overthrowing injustice. And the project of gay liberation becomes... well, nothing, because you cannot formulate the oppression of homosexuals in role language except through the concept of 'deviance'. Attempting to loosen sex roles to make the deviance disappear would be to undermine the very solidarity of gay people that gay-liberation politics depend on. Gay liberation theory itself has turned in other directions (see Plummer, 1981).

Power analysis and categoricalism

The analysis of power is, by contrast, a starting point for the second general approach to a theory of gender relations. While Mead and Parsons synthesised the field around the theme of custom and reciprocity, de Beauvoir synthesised it around the theme of the subordination of women. The more radical feminisms that have developed this line of thought since the late 1960s have done so in two main ways. One is to focus on the relation of sexual domination itself as the core of the matter. Shulamith Firestone (1970) offered the first systematic synthesis on these lines, speaking of 'sex class'. Newer versions such as Mary Daly's (1978) picture of global patriarchy sustained by force, fear and collaboration have focussed even more specifically on men's violence towards women as the core of the core. The focus on pornography and rape in much recent feminism (e.g. Dworkin, 1981) is closely connected with this. Pornography is regarded as an expression of the violence in male sexuality and as a means of domination of women. Rape is seen as an act of patriarchal violence rather than sexual desire; in Susan Brownmiller's (1975) well-known argument, 'a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear'.

Other feminists, however, have seen naked force and sexual domination as something less than a prime cause; have seen them, rather, in the context of larger structures and the circumstances they generate. One argument stresses the sexual division of labour, in a now substantial literature about the division between domestic and public spheres of life (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974), about the effects of women's mothering (Chodorow, 1978), and about the dynamics of change in work places (Game and Pringle, 1983). Another focusses on the structure and dynamic of capitalism, and the ideological conditions for its reproduction from day to day and generation to generation (see the literature reviewed by Barrett, 1980). Yet another moves out to the general conditions of human culture and the structure of kinship exchange (Mitchell, 1975).

In much of this theorising the categories 'women' and 'men' are taken as being in no need of further examination or finer differentiation. Theory operates with the categories as given; it does not concern itself with how they come to be what they are. I will call this habit of thought 'categoricalism'; it is, I think, closely analogous to the categorical thinking that underpins both stratificationism and structuralism in class analysis (see Connell, 1983).

The most obvious examples are where the categories are presumed to be biological, and the relation of patriarchal power is straightforwardly a relation between the categories as collections of people. Thus 'rape ... all men ... all women' (Brownmiller); 'pornography: men possessing women' (Dworkin); and so on. It is easy to see how this would follow from any tendency towards biological reductionism, given the common (if mistaken) assumption that sexual biology divides humans neatly into well-defined and distinct categories.

Yet a very similar *use* of gender categories can be found in the work of many feminists who are emphatically not biological determinists. This is true both of work that has concerned individual psychology, such as Mitchell's and Chodorow's psychoanalytic accounts of femininity, and of arguments about the institution of marriage, like Christine Delphy's (1977) analysis of the exploitation of wives' labour by husbands, and the marxist-feminist debate over 'domestic labour' and capitalism (Hartmann, 1979). Here, the basis of categoricism is not (or not explicitly) biology so much as a radically simplified normative model of the family. The argument is developed (curiously like functionalist sex-role theory) by analysis of a normative standard case, or a case presumed to be normative. The results are tacitly generalised to 'women' and 'men' at large.

In some ways this is curious, as a great deal of empirical and policy work by other feminists has gone towards exploding the notion of a standard case that underpins so much official welfare and economic policy. There are now detailed criticisms of the assumptions that everyone (or nearly everyone) lives in a nuclear family, that all women have (or should have) a man supporting them, that having children presupposes a husband (see Baldock and Cass, 1983, and Campbell, 1984, among many others). Yet the pull of categorical thinking has been very strong. It has been reinforced by other intellectual influences – Lacanian psychoanalysis as a model in the analysis of culture, structuralism generally – as well as by its usefulness as a mobilising rhetoric for various movements in sexual politics.

A major effect of this has been to direct feminist theory away from divisions that cut across, or seriously complicate, the women/men categories: class, race, nationality, age. This is less so now than it was even five years ago, but is still a common problem. More strikingly, there is difficulty getting to grips with divisions that arise within the field of gender relations itself and hence bear directly on the processes constituting gender categories. The most notable is the question of heterosexism, straight society's fear and hatred of homosexuals, which must be regarded as one of the crucial patterns in gender relations. It is very difficult to come to grips with this using a categorical model of gender. The point also applies to other types of differentiation among masculinities and femininities.

More: categorical thinking has led a significant body of feminist theory back to positions that contemporary feminism started by rejecting. If 'all men' are seriously to be taken as a political category, about the only things they actually have in common are their penises. The biological fact of maleness thus gets attached to the social fact of power, not by historical analysis but by definition. Conversely, the biological fact of femaleness becomes the central way of defining the experience of women. (See for instance the vulva as the central symbol in Judy Chicago's famous artwork *The Dinner Party*). The curve of American radical feminism back towards biological determinism has been traced by Hester Eisenstein, who well summarises the 'false universalism' characteristic of categorical thought:

To some extent, this habit of thought grew inevitably from the need to establish gender as a legitimate intellectual category. But too often it gave rise to analysis that, in spite of its narrow base of white, middle-class experience, purported to speak about and on behalf of all women, a black or white, poor or rich. (1984:132)

The spread of this kind of thinking is indicated by shifts in language. We now often hear phrases like 'male power', 'male violence', 'male culture', 'malestream thought', 'male authority'. In each of these phrases a social fact or process is coupled with, and implicitly attributed to, a biological fact. The result is not only to collapse together a rather heterogeneous group (do gays suffer from malestream thought, for instance; or boys?). It also, curiously, takes the heat off the open opponents of feminism. The hard-line male chauvinist is now less liable to be thought personally responsible for what he says or does in particular circumstances, since what he says or does is attributable to the general fatality of being male. As feminist thought has increased its recognition of differences among women, it seems — broadly speaking — to have weakened its ability to recognise differences among men. Another nuance of language shows the structure of feeling here. It is remarkable how many passages of contemporary writing about sexual politics talk of women as 'women' and men as 'males'. I have never found the reverse.

That this is a point where argument and emotion have got tangled is not accidental. There is a basic theoretical problem here. The social categories of gender are quite unlike other categories of social analysis, such as class, in being firmly and visibly connected to biological difference and function in a biological process. It is therefore both tempting and easy to fall back on biological explanation of any gender pattern. This naturalisation of social processes is without question the commonest mechanism of sexual ideologies. That biological difference underpins and explains the social supremacy of men over women is the prized belief of enormous numbers of men, and a useful excuse for resisting equality. Academic or pseudo-academic versions of this argument, male-supremacist 'sociobiology' from Lionel Tiger's *Men in Groups* through Steven Goldberg's *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* to the present, find a never-failing audience.

This kind of ideology cannot be overthrown simply by confronting it with another categoricism with the plus and minus signs reversed. We need a different approach to understanding the relationship between biological process and social structure, which in turn requires a different way of handling social structure itself. What this can be based on is suggested negatively by the viewpoints just discussed. Both patriarchal and anti-patriarchal categoricism remove the element of practical politics from sexual politics, that is, the element of choice, doubt, strategy, planning, error, transformation. Without this element sexual politics becomes (like the 'battle of the sexes' of traditional popular culture in which nothing ever changes) not the 'dialectic of sex' Firestone glimpsed but an old-fashioned stand-off.

Approaches through practice

We need, then, a way of thinking about sexual politics which develops the understanding of *power* by giving full weight to the *politics*. We need ways of grasping the interweaving of personal lives and social structure without collapsing towards

voluntarism and shapeless pluralism on one side, or categoricalism and biological determinism on the other. In modern writing about gender this has perhaps been best done in fiction and autobiography. In books like Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, Anja Meulenbelt's *The Shame is Over*, Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair*, Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter*, there is a strong sense of the constraining power of gender relations (and other structures like class and race), a sense of something that people fetch up against. Yet this 'something' is neither abstract nor simple, being real in other people and their actions, with all their complexities, ambiguities and contradictions. And this reality is constantly being worked on, and – in ways pleasant and unpleasant – transformed.

There are some parallels in the widely-discussed historical writings on sexuality and family by Michel Foucault and Jacques Donzelot. The focus of this work is the developing social apparatuses, based in the professions and the state, which attempt to regiment the domestic lives of ordinary people. This work is very clear about the social construction of sexual ideology and gender identities. As Foucault (1980) observes, the very need for everyone to have a clear-cut unchangeable identity as a member of one sex or the other is historically recent. The difficulty is that the history of power/knowledge apparatuses gives no grip on the grass-roots reality that was the *object* of the doctors', judges' and psychiatrists' strategies. There is, indeed, a strong tendency in this work to take it for granted that the strategies succeeded (e.g. Donzelot 1979: 58) – to elide the practices of the powerful and the lives of the oppressed. The history of the social relations of gender as a social structure is a considerably larger enterprise than the 'history of sexuality' as construed by Foucault.

In very general terms, how to build this kind of social theory is known. In principle, categoricalism can be resolved by a theory of practice, focussing on what people do by way of shaping the social relations they live in. In principle, voluntarism can be overcome by an attention to the structure of relations as a condition of all practice.

The notion of structure as process, to which Anthony Giddens (1976) gives the awkward but useful name 'structuration', is difficult to formulate abstractly. Abstract formulations of the structure-and practice problem such as Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice slip towards static reproductionism, as I have shown elsewhere (Connell, 1983: 140-161). But it makes good sense when understood as the principle of analysis of a historical dynamic. Thompson has remarked that class is not the machine but the way the machine works, and the same is true here. The constraining power of gender as a social structure is found not in its geometry so much as in its fluid dynamics, the logic of its historical transformation. To analyse a social structure is basically to work out its constraints, its internal pressures, tensions and disruptions, and its potentials for change.

It seems to me that some feminist and gay theorists have made significant beginnings with this kind of analysis, though their work is not recognised as a 'school' and their politics are very diverse. One of the first was Juliet Mitchell. The second section of her now somewhat neglected book *Woman's Estate* (1971) made a sustained attempt to sort out the social position of women in terms of four 'structures': production, reproduction, sexuality, and the socialisation of children. Each of those generates its own form of the oppression of women. Each has its own historical trajectory and at different times may change at a faster or slower pace than

others. I don't think Mitchell's model of structures stands up; the four are types of practice rather than 'structures' in the full sense. But her recognition of internal differentiation and historical unevenness is very important.

Partly influenced by Mitchell's work, the American anthropologist Gayle Rubin (1975) developed a formal comparative analysis of the 'system of relationships', the 'systematic social apparatus', by which women became the prey of men. She called this the 'sex/gender system'. Though her discussion of it is rather structuralist in the Lévi-Strauss sense, the argument goes a long way to show what it is to have a systematic social theory of gender relations.

Adrienne Rich (1980), pursuing the critique of 'compulsory heterosexuality' that was also stated by Rubin, develops an account of the social relationships constructed by women among themselves in contradistinction to their connections with men. Her concept of a 'lesbian continuum', as Eisenstein (1984: 55-7) notes, drifts towards an ahistorical universalism, and thus a categorical theory of gender. But it need not be so. Certainly the historical analysis of this system of relationships is a major part of an understanding of gender relations.

This is one of the issues taken up in a notable study by Jill Matthews (1984) of 'the historical construction of femininity' in twentieth-century Australia, which uses the records of psychiatric incarceration to study the impact of changing ideals of femininity in the lives of particular women. Matthews stresses the historicity of femininity (and by implication of masculinity) as lived experience, not just imposed regulation; and firmly links the micro-contexts of household relationships to the large-scale patterns of demographic, economic and cultural change.

On a larger scale again, David Fernbach (1981) also offers a social and relational analysis of what is commonly seen as pre-social desire (or anti-social behaviour). Focussing on homosexual relationships among men, he sets the modern emergence of homosexual identity (as studied by Weeks (1977) and Bray (1982)) in the long context of the history of gender relations stretching back to the neolithic. This is speculative in many ways, but certainly a good deal more like a real history than the myth-making about 'origins' that passes current in much of the literature about sexual politics.

Biological 'bases', and practical politics

How can a social theory of gender relations, developing along such lines, deal with the question of biological 'bases', the natural differences of sex? There must be, first, a really thorough rejection of the notion that natural difference *is* a 'basis' of gender, that the social patterns are somehow an *elaboration* of natural difference. This idea is enshrined in the very term 'sex role', another example of conceptual slippage through the juxtaposition of a biological term with a dramaturgical one. It is extraordinarily pervasive. A useful cure is to read the excellent though little-noticed book by Suzanne Kessler and Wendy McKenna *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach*, which goes through the *biological* literature on human sex differences and shows how even that rests on the taken-for-grantedness of social attributions of gender. We always see the 'natural' through social spectacles, especially human 'nature'.

More generally, natural-difference doctrines result in an untenable view of the

nature of human life and the relation between the social and the non-social. Natural difference is a passively-suffered condition, like being subject to gravity. If human life were in its basic structures (gender being one) so conditioned, human history would be unthinkable. For history – the full tapestry from Australopithecus to Ronald Reagan – depends on the transcendence of the natural through social practice.

This point holds good without the bland optimism about progress that has generally accompanied it. In an age of rising awareness of environmental and nuclear disaster it is easier to see negativity in the human rupture from the natural; a theme strongly developed, for instance, by 'eco-feminism' and the Greenham Common women's peace movement. It is also possible to see an expanded meaning in the idea central to the work of Gordon Childe, the pioneer of global history as a science, that the relation between nature and human history is one of practical transformation. This means both the transformation of nature by practice that has sustained each stage of human social evolution, and the mutations of practice itself that have made shifts of structure possible. The practical transformation opens up new possibilities, and these are the tissue of human life. But it always does this by piling up new pressures and risks, for which some people, not just some objects, have to pay. Human society has 'exploited nature' by exploiting people, and the oppressions of gender relations are part of this pattern.

To speak of practical transcendence is to speak of practical negation. Here we have arrived at the crucial point about how a social theory of gender relations must handle the question of biological sex. Social gender relations do not *express* natural patterns; they *negate* the biological statute. (There is a very close parallel here with Sartre's (1976) analysis of the negation of the practico-inert in the developed phenomena of group practice.)

This is not an exotic or original idea. Rubin, for instance, observes:

A kinship system is not a list of biological relatives. It is a system of categories and statuses which often contradict actual genetic relationships. (1975:169)

and

Men and women are, of course, different. But they are not as different as day and night, earth and sky, yin and yang, life and death. In fact, from the standpoint of nature, men and women are closer to each other than either is to anything else – for instance, mountains, kangaroos, or coconut palms. Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities. (179-80)

The social is radically un-natural, and its structure can never be deduced from natural structures. What undergoes transformation is genuinely transformed. But this un-naturalness does not mean disconnection, a radical *separation* from nature. Practical negation involves an incorporation of what is negated into the transformed practice. A *practical relevance* is established, rather than a determination, between natural and social structures. That is to say the social process *deals with* the biological patterns given to it. (As, the ecologists remind us, biological processes have to deal with the social forces impinging on them.)

The practices through which this relation is sustained include labour, as marxism tells us. They also include the practices of power and sexuality. An analysis of the way these kinds of practices are organised is, I think, the best path towards a systematic

analysis of the sub-structures of gender relations as a social field. I hope to be able to publish a detailed analysis of this kind shortly.

Don't worry folks, we're nearly home! Voluntarism and sex role theory, it was argued earlier, have a general connection with the politics of liberal feminism. Categorical theories of gender have been associated with the more radical feminisms of women's liberation, with an increasingly pessimistic assessment of the prospects for immediate reform of gender relations, and a conviction that more total revolution is needed in the future. The kind of practice-based theory of gender relations that now seems possible has not crystallised far enough to acquire a recognised political identity, but it seems to me to have definite political implications.

In particular, this is a line of thought that is as radical as categoricism in its formulation of the depth of the issues and the scope of the goal of liberation, but allows for much more complexity and confusion on the path towards it. It seems to point towards a political strategy of radical alliances between groups constituted around different processes in the general structure of gender relations. Thus, notably, it brings back the question of the relation between women's liberation and gay liberation as a strategic issue. It is also possible to open up questions about the sexual politics of relations among different groups of men, and the ways some of them can become aligned with feminism in ways other than random individual choice.

Abstract theory can often be a diversion from practice, in sexual politics as elsewhere. Yet theory matters. Intellectuals have been of particular importance in women's liberation and gay liberation compared with other social movements, and the subversion of oppressive gender relations in part *is* intellectual work. (It is not an accident that a key technique of early second-wave feminism was 'consciousness-raising'.) The importance of theory is sensed by the ideological opponents of feminism and gay liberation. You have only to notice how much airplay has been given in the conservative media to the supposed 'recantations' by Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer. Whether or not the approach to theory proposed in this essay turns out the right one, I am sure that work on these questions is among the most important projects for social scientists currently to undertake.

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